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# **The “Best Union Members”: Class, Race, Culture, and Black Worker Militancy in Chicago’s Stockyards during the 1930s**

PAUL STREET

FEBRUARY 15, 1938, was a tense day at the Wilson & Company meatpacking plant in Chicago’s South Side stockyards district. That afternoon, eighty-seven workers in the Wilson’s sheep-killing “gang” idled the plant’s entire sheep division for nearly an hour. Those workers stepped down from their raised work platforms, leaving valuable sheep carcasses spoiling and dangling from overhead conveyors, to protest the discharge of veteran black worker Johnny Johnson, who had been fired because blisters prevented him from tying lamb legs at the pace demanded by his foreman. The striking workers included both blacks and whites. Given the predominantly black composition of the stockyards’ cattle-, hog-, and, especially, sheep-killing departments in the 1930s, however, the strikers were mostly African Americans. Faced with dramatic, interracial resistance at a strategic beginning point in the continuous-flow slaughtering, processing, and packing process, Wilson took Johnson back on another job.<sup>1</sup>

The striking workers belonged to the recently formed Packinghouse Workers’ Organizing Committee (PWOC), an especially aggressive and idealistic affiliate of the militant new Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). The industrial-unionist CIO was formed in 1938 as rival to the more conservative, cautious, and craft-oriented American Federation of Labor (AFL). It was dedicated to the organization of all industrial workers, regardless of skill and related distinctions of race, religion and ethnicity.<sup>2</sup>

The work stoppage at Wilson’s was just one among many examples of black packinghouse workers’ early participation in the militant new unionism of the CIO. When Harold Preece surveyed Chicago’s meatpacking district for the black daily *Chicago Defender* in the fall of 1939, he found “colored members”—from the union’s Assistant National Director “Hank” Johnson “down to the Negro shop-steward who

may preach at some storefront church on Sunday”—to be “the backbone” of the PWOC.<sup>3</sup> That same year, the University of Chicago’s Oscar Hutton argued that black workers were “the backbone of many CIO unions” in Chicago, especially the PWOC. He discovered that black packinghouse workers “remain intensely loyal” to their CIO union even after long periods of layoff from the meatpacking industry.<sup>4</sup> One year earlier, black sociologist Horace Cayton learned from a PWOC officer that blacks had surpassed Polish Americans as “the best union members” in the “Yards” largely Polish- and Lithuanian-American workforce.<sup>5</sup> Consistent with that claim, blacks comprised a disproportionate share of the union’s stewards, volunteer organizers and committee members and the animal killing floors staffed primarily by African American males were the early PWOC’s most militant and heavily organized work departments in Chicago.<sup>6</sup> “Colored people has woke up to unionism now,” one black packinghouse labor told Cayton: “he [the black worker] won’t accept the boss-man’s telling him, ‘you don’t want to be with the white man’. . . . The average Negro makes a good union man.”<sup>7</sup>

The special black militancy was not limited, however, to males. In 1939, Chicago PWOC activist Anna Novack told Betty Burke of the Federal Writers Project that “the Polish and Lithuanian girls” were “the hardest to get in” the CIO packinghouse union. “The colored girls,” by contrast, “come into the union easy, and at union meetings they now stand up and have their say.” Novack’s claim was seconded more than three decades later in an oral history interview with Sophie Kosciolowski, an early CIO shop-steward at the Chicago Armour plant and the first head of PWOC’s Women’s Organizing Committee. “The colored girls were better,” Kosciolowski recalled, “easier to organize than the white women.”<sup>8</sup>

Chicago’s stockyards provide an especially striking, though not the only, anomaly for labor historian David Brody’s ill-advised 1985 judgement that, for black workers, “the CIO cause seemed less a hopeful event than a threat to their precarious place in American industry.”<sup>9</sup>

This new black militancy marked a significant turn of fortune for those engaged in the struggle to organize workers in the notorious industrial setting that Upton Sinclair dubbed “the Jungle.” Chicago packinghouse union activists long had been frustrated by what they perceived as black workers’ tendency not to join unions before the 1930s. During national meatpacking strikes in 1904 and 1921–1922, Chicago packinghouse unions had collapsed, thanks partly to the packers’ use of black strikebreakers, who refused to join “the white man’s union.” Black

workers, hired in part for their perceived company loyalty, attained a permanent and significant presence in the packinghouses, particularly on the strategic, all-important animal killing floors, where the packing companies especially valued loyal, that is, non-union workers.<sup>10</sup> The black community's reputation for siding with capital over labor within and beyond the stockyards led a worker in the Armour plant's employee barbershop to interrupt activists discussing the CIO's possibilities in the 1930s stockyards with the question, "what about the colored people, who break strikes?"<sup>11</sup>

How and why did these previously "company loyal" black workers emerge as the stockyards' "best," most militant union members during the 1930s? Historical scholarship on blacks and the CIO, which now includes an expanding new literature focused on the meatpacking industry and Chicago's stockyards,<sup>12</sup> finds a combination of forces that simultaneously pushed and pulled black industrial workers into the new industrial unions of the 1930s. On the push side stood black workers' troubled relationship with industrial employers, who betrayed the heretofore mostly non-union black community by designating blacks as the "first fired and the last re-hired" during the Great Depression. At the same time, employers' conscious scattering of black workers throughout workplace facilities during the 1920s produced a shared, interracial workplace experience of exploitation, interdependence, and resistance for black and white workers. As a result, union organizers were able to build upon a new biracial solidarity developed on the shop-floor over the course of the interwar period. In a classic case of ironic and unintended consequences, employers' racialization of their industrial relations provided conditions favorable for interracial unionization and black militancy.

On the pull side, many CIO unions made special appeals to black labor, putting the particular needs of black workers at the forefront of their list of demands. CIO leaders and organizers knew that the industrial model of union organization they championed required racially inclusive unions, especially where blacks made up a significant portion of the workforce. They were aware that leading industrial employers had commonly used black workers to prevent or destroy unions and that managers placed black workers in hot, filthy, backbreaking and otherwise disagreeable tasks at the strategic front end of the modern industrial work process (killing floors in meatpacking and iron foundries in Detroit's auto plants) where workers possessed their greatest capacity to halt production and damage materials. They knew also that unions affli-

ated with the rival AFL owed part of their weakness in industry to black workers' perception of AFL unions as hostile and indifferent to black needs and capacities. This knowledge was greatest among the CIO's significant and influential number of Communist and other leftist organizers, for whom belief in racial equality was a fundamental article of faith as well as practical organizing necessity.

This commonsensical and largely workplace-based analysis<sup>13</sup> provides no small part of the explanation for black union leadership in the Chicago stockyards of the late 1930s. Chicago's meatpacking industry possessed in relatively great degree each of the factors that historians rightly deem crucial to CIO success with black workers: a significant, strategic, and long-term black position in the workplace, the racial integration of key work departments over the course of the interwar years, the betrayal of outward black company allegiance through racially discriminatory layoffs during the Great Depression, and a strong union commitment to racial equality influenced by effective left-wing leadership.

But this crucial conjuncture of workplace and union factors, the discovery of which lies at the heart of recent scholarship on race and class in Chicago's packinghouses,<sup>14</sup> does not provide the entire explanation. Two additional factors deserve more extended treatment than they have so far received. The first of these is the all-or-nothing logic built into African Americans' distinctive triangular relationship with white employers and the white-dominated labor movement during the war and interwar years. Hired by workplace masters who viewed them as an inferior workforce valuable chiefly as a cheap, non-/anti-union reserve black workers in "the Yards" enjoyed distinctly small space for choosing sides during recurrent packinghouse labor conflicts. Since managers were less tolerant of black resistance than protests by white workers and were likely to fire large numbers of blacks in response to the perceived union militancy of even a few African American workers, black workers felt distinctly compelled to choose either united outward "company loyalty" or united militancy to secure victory for a strong union that would protect their job rights against employer retaliation.

Second, there was an ethno-cultural dimension to black labor militancy in the interwar years. African American culture, community, and consciousness positively informed and encouraged an especially militant and idealistic brand of black trade unionism in Chicago's Depression-era stockyards. Once they chose unionism, many black packinghouse workers were more militant and effective as trade-unionists partly because of what they brought on to the shop-floor and into the

union hall from their distinctive and race-conscious culture and community. The PWOC in Chicago awakened to, and connected with, elements of black workers' historical experience, culture, and consciousness that provided special advantages to the CIO cause at the same time that black workers woke up to the logic of industrial unionism.

The second part of this supplemental explanation builds on a recent academic literature that has begun to challenge the once conventional wisdom that African Americans' culture and community inevitably oriented black workers away from the labor movement. This scholarship highlights black cultural and political attributes that positively informed black worker resistance in the CIO era and discovers previously hidden dynamics of black working-class culture. Thanks especially to the writings of Robin D.G. Kelley, it shows how trade unionism was one of several interrelated weapons—including open organizational resistance and more informal, “sub-political” tactics like feigning illness, employee theft, slowdowns, and even sabotage—that black workers employed in a many-sided struggle against racism.<sup>15</sup>

This new literature on black worker resistance and CIO militancy has focused mainly on the Jim Crow South, where timeworn structures of legal segregation, black disenfranchisement, and open racial terrorism make the multi-faceted cultural, political, and sub-political dimensions of black labor experience obvious to historians. There has been little effort to examine the distinctive cultural and political dimensions of black CIO activism in the not-so racially “free” North, where more subtle but nonetheless pervasive patterns of racial discrimination helped ensure that the story of northern black labor was no less intertwined with the development of African Americans' racially distinctive cultural and political experience and consciousness than in the South. As part of a broader effort to show how African Americans' unique ethnic experience contributed to the labor movement—the same is widely recognized by historians when it comes to white workers of diverse European ancestry—this article seeks to redress some of that regional gap in the new historiography of black labor while deepening our understanding of the emergence of mass production unionism.

### **“STRIKE INSURANCE”: THE MAKING OF A BLACK WORKFORCE**

Between 1915 and 1918, Chicago's packinghouse employers increased their number of black workers from 1100 (less than 5 percent of the



total stockyards workforce) to more than 10,000 (roughly 20 percent). Most members of this large new black workforce were recent arrivals from the Deep South, participants in an historic black movement from the farms and plantations of the ex-Slave states to the factories and cities of the North. Laid-off in large numbers during the recession of early 1921, black workers were re-hired en masse to break the national meatpacking strike of 1921–1922, and for the rest of the 1920s they made up roughly 30 percent of the “Yards” workforce.<sup>16</sup>

Claims by leading Chicago packinghouse employers of a special benevolent concern for their new black workforce did not square with numerous racist personnel practices in the stockyards during and after World War I.<sup>17</sup> Even so, the “yards” nonetheless stood as relative islands of opportunity and security in a local labor market sea of exclusion and oppression. Many of Chicago’s industrial employers either refused to hire any black laborers or employed only a token number. Thus, the packers by 1920 employed more than half of the city’s black industrial workers.<sup>18</sup>

Most Chicago industrialists employed blacks exclusively in the lowest paid, least secure, and most disagreeable jobs. The packers were somewhat different. Black packinghouse workers were disproportionately lumped in the stockyards’ dirtiest, wettest, and worst-paid jobs and departments. They were effectively banned from certain favored and publicly sensitive tasks and work rooms (particularly those where white plant visitors on company-sponsored tours complained about “colored” hands touching finished edible products). Few if any blacks worked in the “auxiliary” packinghouse crafts (as carpenters, steam fitters, and electricians, etc.) or as foremen. Still, blacks took an unusual number and share of middling and prized semiskilled and even skilled “production” jobs in the stockyards. They worked in knife positions on the all-important killing and cutting floors, the historical centers of knife skill, shop-floor militancy, and rank-and-file “workplace bargaining power” in meatpacking.

These mostly unskilled, notoriously difficult, unpleasant, and exhausting work departments may have been as much as 90 percent black in the 1930s, according to one union estimate. There blacks entered the industry’s “knife aristocracy,” working as cattle-splitters, “floormen,” “rumpers,” “ham-facers,” and in other simultaneously rugged and delicate jobs vital to the packers’ feverish pursuit of “uninterrupted production.” By 1930, Chicago’s packinghouses employed roughly 2000 black butchers, making the stockyards a leading provider of relatively

good-paying industrial jobs for black Chicagoans. Alongside their considerable, even disproportionate presence in the anti-union "employee representation plans" ("company unions" formed during and immediately after World War I) of the big employers like Swift's, Armour's, and Wilson' and their large numbers in the stockyards, their presence in semiskilled and skilled butcher positions meant that black packinghouse workers in the 1920s "feel more nearly on competitive equality with white workers than in any industry in the city."<sup>19</sup>

Blacks owed their large-scale, strategic presence in the stockyards to the packers' massive wartime manpower needs and to the meatpacking industry's abundance of disagreeable (wet, filthy, exhausting, and generally unpleasant) tasks that matched conventional racist notions of "Negro work." Also significant was the "divide and rule" calculation by packinghouse managers that blacks were peculiarly resistant to, and/or incapable of, joining the militant working-class movement that confronted American industrial employers during and after the war and that found a leading local expressions in Chicago's Stockyards Labor Council (SYLC).

It was with the SYLC in mind that Chicago packinghouse managers in the 1920s recalled how "big business in the stockyards" used "the black man" to "pull through" its wartime and postwar struggle with "dangerous" and "radical" immigrant labor. Packinghouse officials interviewed by the University of Chicago's Alma Herbst in the mid-1920s criticized "colored" workers for supposed inherent "laziness" and "inefficiency," but praised them for "loyalty and reliability during labor troubles." The chief reason for employing blacks "cited by every [stockyards] establishment," Herbst found, "was fear of future strikes and attempts to unionize the butchers." That fear helps explain Blacks' rising presence on the killing floors.<sup>20</sup> Consistent with managerial reckoning, the wartime labor movement probably never recruited more than 15 percent of the black workforce and blacks proved to be the packers' most outwardly "loyal" workers in the 1920s.<sup>21</sup>

### THE RACE-CONSCIOUS LOGIC AND LIMITS OF COMPANY LOYALTY

A contemporary stereotype white employers and white workers shared portrayed black workers as tragic, docile victims of forces and actors beyond their comprehension and control. Those forces and actors included the legacy of southern paternalism, corporate racial paternalism,



and a northern black middle class that preached company loyalty to black migrants in return for corporate money. But, as recent historical literature shows, Chicago's black packinghouse workers did not give the meatpacking firms outward company loyalty in the pre-CIO stockyards out of simple hopelessness or blind paternalization.

Their loyalty was given conditionally and on the basis of rational, idealistic, and proud calculations reflecting the self-active impulses behind the Great Migration. They offered it because the admittedly racist packinghouse employers were—for reasons having little to do with their supposed benevolent concern for “colored” workers—relatively “kind” to black labor in terms of hiring and job placement. Black workers' company loyalty was given also because the labor movement and white-ethnic working-class culture in and around the stockyards were more than just tinged by racism (the bloody Chicago race riot of 1919 was a tragic lesson in the racial attitudes of many white workers) and because a Chicago packinghouse job provided a ticket out of oppressive southern racism and into the relative racial freedom and autonomy of the urban-industrial North. It reflected blacks' practical, if perhaps somewhat self-fulfilling, judgement that unions could not win in the stockyards. Mediated by a proud race consciousness and a realistic calculation of black self-interest, black company loyalty in the stockyards was contingent and reversible when and if—as occurred in the 1930s—the employers came to be seen as working against black interests, northern opportunities for “the race” collapsed, and a powerful and racially sensitive new unionism emerged.<sup>22</sup>

Not surprisingly, such loyalty came with real limits. Given the overall context of race relations in and around the pre-CIO Chicago stockyards, the most remarkable fact may be that, as historian James Barrett has shown, a considerable minority of black workers did support packinghouse unions during and after the war. While these early black trade unionists were mostly atypical “northern [non-migrant] Negroes” with long experience in Chicago industry, they showed that black workers were capable of combining class- and race-consciousness in ways that anticipated the CIO era.<sup>23</sup>

The city's black packinghouse workers in the non-union 1920s resisted exploitation and discrimination in the workplace in more informal, subtle ways. They feigned stupidity. They exhibited an outward fatalism that supervisors called “lack of hope on the job.” They were often absent from work, according to managers and engaged in occasional work stoppages, particularly on the pivotal killing floors.<sup>24</sup> Man-

agers and foremen chose to misinterpret (in the tradition of southern plantation overseers) this behavior as evidence of “natural” Black “laziness,” unreliability, and inferiority.

This partial black “loyalty” was conditioned by packinghouse employers’ racist/racialist evaluation of “colored” workers and their related tendency to view all black workers as an undifferentiated mass. As one *Defender* writer lectured black workers in 1923, “Negroes are employed by the bunch in certain industries, or they are kept out as a group.” Given managers’ notion—inherited from the South and supported in the “scientific” industrial eugenics of the time—of black labor as inherently “inefficient,” black workers especially depended for their relatively scarce job opportunities on managers’ perception of them as “strike insurance”—a uniformly loyal, non-union reserve of workers. Far less than their white counterparts could black workers risk the appearance of protest sentiment. “The Negro worker,” as NAACP official William Dean Pickens noted in 1923, “cannot afford to be neutral” in labor-capital conflicts. Since he more than his white counterpart burned employment bridges both for himself and other workers of his race through joining a union or strike, “he must be either for labor organization or against it.”<sup>25</sup>

The only sort of union worth joining by this logic would have to be one that was both committed to protecting black job rights and powerful enough to do so. If they were fortunate enough to find such an organization and then decided to join it, black workers would especially have to fight to guarantee labor victory. For black workers would pay a higher price for defeat than their white counterparts. Given what black workers and community leaders perceived, with some justice, as the weakness and racism of the labor movement and working class in and around the pre-CIO stockyards, the anti- or non-union choice became, for them the obvious one to make.

### **“THESE GUYS WORKED TOGETHER”: EMPLOYER BETRAYAL AND INDUSTRIAL-UNIONIST ANTI-RACISM IN THE 1930S**

Racially discriminatory lay-offs in the Great Depression provided crucial background for a new merging of black packinghouse workers’ race-conscious self-activity with the multi-ethnic working-class cause. Between 1930 and 1940, packinghouse employers rewarded blacks’ historical “strike insurance” role by reducing the latter’s share of Chicago

packinghouse jobs from over 31 percent to just under 20 percent. "As unemployment sweeps the city," the University of Chicago's Alma Herbst noted in 1932, blacks found themselves "fighting for the unskilled stockyards work which in Chicago has become traditionally 'Negro.'" The "first [and most commonly] fired" in the 1930s stockyards, blacks were also the "last [re-] hired" when the economy showed signs of recovery. As black Armour sheep butcher Elmer Thomas told Betty Burke of the Federal Writers Project in 1939:<sup>26</sup>

When they raise a gang—that's a term they use in the Yards when there's new men being hired—you can bet you won't see any Negroes coming in. Like in 1933, they were hiring young [white] boys, raw kids, didn't know a thing, but there was plenty of colored boys waiting for the same chance who never got it. [PWOC's] Hank Johnson said the other night . . . there hadn't been a Negro hired in Armour's in seven years. He knows what he's talking about.

The "weeding out" of black labor during the Great Depression gave black workers a chilling experience in the historical fruits of company loyalty. Its lessons were not lost on black community leaders, who dropped both much of their traditional public expressions of appreciation for the packers' supposed corporate racial paternalism and their aversion to trade unionism. The *Chicago Defender* stopped recommending that southern blacks come North. No longer were jobs in the city's steel mills, packinghouses, and Pullman Palace Car shops touted by Chicago's black middle-class as tickets to the Land of Freedom.<sup>27</sup>

Still, blacks in the stockyards would not likely have shed their historical tendency to side with not-so benevolent white capital over labor without the formation of a union remarkable in the sincerity and depth of its commitment to racial justice and to black workers. Perhaps nowhere in northern industry was the black civil rights dimension of the early CIO more evident than in Chicago's stockyards. Chicago PWOC activists used the threat of work stoppages on the killing floors—a recurrent and effective PWOC tactic—to end the practice by managers of starring the black workers' time cards in the Armour and Swift plants. They opposed what they denounced as the packers' "lily white" job-ceiling, threatened to expel white union members who voiced racist sentiments, and anticipated modern affirmative action when they won from Swift & Company an early (Fall of 1937) agreement to hire blacks "according to their proportion in Chicago's population." They encour-

aged blacks to take an unlimited share of union offices, so that blacks held nine of fifteen Chicago PWOC local union presidencies by 1939. They encouraged white workers to accept black shop-stewards as their shop-floor grievance representatives in the face of racial shaming by white foremen and managers—an Irish-American Swift's divisional superintendent asked one Polish-American worker, "do you mean to say *you want this [Black] man to represent you? What's the matter with you and men like you—can't you take care of your own affairs?*" PWOC activists also criticized the absence of blacks in city transit jobs and major league baseball, collected signatures in black churches against the southern poll-tax, sponsored interracial social gatherings in a period when "mixed" interaction was nearly taboo, and threatened union boycotts against taverns and restaurants denying service to blacks. The PWOC even demonstrated outside a white-ethnic South Side Catholic church (St. Agnes) where black Armour workers attending the wedding of a Polish-American co-worker had been harassed by racist parishioners.<sup>28</sup>

Leading union official 'Hank' Johnson contributed to the PWOC's success with Black workers. The eloquent, barrel-chested "Negro orator of the Yards" devastated timeworn white stereotypes of blacks as "poor trade unionists," excited the black rank-and-file for the CIO cause, and helped legitimize that cause in the black community. Borrowed from the CIO's Steelworkers' Organizing Committee for the packinghouse campaign, Johnson was a Communist party member, the veteran of two race riots, and the son of a proud, race-conscious member of the radical Industrial Workers of the World. His writings in the PWOC's newspaper coolly analyzed the union's problems and possibilities. His lunch-hour speeches in the packinghouse district brilliantly ridiculed the packers and preached interracial working-class solidarity.<sup>29</sup> It is an indication of the union's commitment to racial equality that Johnson handled negotiations between the legendary Union Stockyards Transit Company (the oldest establishment in the Yards) and mostly Irish-American livestock handlers when the latter struck in the fall of 1938. Irish Americans had been blacks' most dangerous and persistent antagonists through decades of racial tension on the rugged South Side.<sup>30</sup>

By numerous contemporary accounts, some perhaps exaggerated in their praise, the PWOC achieved notable success in breaking down racial divisions within the packinghouse workforce. Recalling earlier racial tensions in and around the stockyards, Elmer Thomas told Betty Burke that "with the CIO in, that's all like a bad dream gone . . . this

time the white men are with us.” He cited the case of an Irish-American worker who amazed racist Armour officials by vouching for a black worker seeking a loan from the company credit union, telling one manager that “that Black boy’s my friend. He works with me. He’s a union brother . . . and I’m with the union too.”<sup>31</sup> According to the *Chicago Defender*, a longstanding and vociferous critic of racism in Chicago unions and neighborhoods, in the fall of 1939, the PWOC’s “fight to abolish racial terror and discrimination” even transformed race relations in the legendary, racist, white-ethnic “Back-of-the-Yards” neighborhood (directly adjacent to the packinghouse district), where “No Negro better show his face west of Ashland Avenue” had been a community slogan since at least the 1919 Chicago race riots:

Today, because the PWOC planted the seed of unity in the stony soils of Packingtown, Negroes walk freely and safely. Any public place which refused them service would be quickly put out of business by a boycott of white union members. On the very streets where danger once lurked for Negroes, colored men stop for long chats about baseball with Polish or Irish workers.

Oscar Hutton even found that the PWOC’s biracial influence filtered down to Back-of-the-Yards children, who stopped “shouting derisive statements” at blacks walking to and from the packinghouses.<sup>32</sup>

The PWOC’s advanced interracialism reflected the practical necessity of organizing the largely black killing floors in the face of a strong legacy of black strikebreaking in meatpacking. So powerful was the combination of necessity and legacy that, as one PWOC activist told Hutton, “the whites [would] not join until they saw what the Negroes were going to do.” The union “faced the task of securing the support of colored workers before organization could get under way.”<sup>33</sup>

At the same time, the CIO packinghouse union tapped an underlying biracial solidarity—an interracial shop-floor “fraternity” by the recollections of a leading black Chicago Swift’s CIO activist. That “fraternity” was rooted in years of shared shop-floor experience that resulted from managers’ introducing “colored” labor into most work departments during World War I and the 1920s. Alma Herbst’s description of tasks and wages in one section of a meatpacking establishment’s hog-killing department suggests a significantly color-blind routine in a notoriously disagreeable and de-personalizing workplace milieu during the interwar years:<sup>34</sup>

A Negro man, who removes the head and cuts out the tongue, receives 50 cents an hour. The head is skinned by a white man who receives 49 cents an hour. The same rate is paid for chiseling heads and templing them, making snouts, cutting off lips, cutting out cheeks, trimming and skinning the sterilized heads. The first four jobs are held by Negro men; a white man and a Negro cut out the cheeks, and the remaining jobs are performed by white men. Negro men in this same groups cut out eyelids, split heads, grind and chop off the nostril, and grind out the teeth . . . two white men receive 42 cents for pulling snouts and cutting ear-drums. . . . The workers stand on brick floors with their backs against the wall, while a line of hogs moves steadily not six feet distant. The light is artificial. Both the material and the surroundings are excessively damp.

Reinforced by the shared traumas of the Great Depression and the related biracial appeal of the New Deal Democratic party, black and white industrial workers found such workplace arrangements helped create common interracial ground which redounded to the benefit of the CIO. "We never had an incident," recalled leading PWOC militant Herbert March, "because of the Poles being mad at Blacks coming to union meetings." There existed a "certain relationship" between black and white-ethnic workers that "just made sense . . . these guys worked together."<sup>35</sup>

Last but not least, PWOC's aggressive interracialism reflected a significant Leftist presence in Chicago's Black Belt and in the CIO packinghouse union. The Communist party's (CP) black civil rights and relief activism on Chicago's South Side during the early 1930s energized a number of black workers who later became leading PWOC members, providing them important lessons in direct action techniques and the possibilities for interracial protest.<sup>36</sup> Later in the decade, the CP placed activists on the executive board of each major Chicago PWOC local. It claimed the stockyards' two leading activists ('Hank' Johnson and Herbert March) and had what leading party and union militant Herbert March (a pre-CIO veteran of CP civil rights/anti-lynching campaigns in the Southwest and the Chicago PWOC's only open party member) recalls as "several hundred" members in the Chicago stockyards of the late 1930s.<sup>37</sup> Its members in the PWOC embraced the idea of racial equality as both a practical organizing tool and a core principle of political belief. Placing special emphasis on working-class racial divisions as explanation for past labor defeats in meatpacking and other leading industries, they worked with a "religious" and "crusading" zeal



to keep the notion of, and necessity for racial equality “constantly before the membership.”<sup>38</sup>

The party’s presence in the PWOC in Chicago may have partly resulted from blacks’ still large and strategic presence in the city’s meatpacking industry. While earlier generations of stockyards militants had not uncommonly referred to “colored” workers as “ignorant,” “hopeless,” and “docile,” some 1930s Communists thought in romantic terms of a black Proletarian “vanguard.” As early as the late 1920s, the original wartime Stockyards Labor Council (SYLC) leader turned top CP official and presidential candidate William Z. Foster claimed that “doubly” exploited black workers could provide an especially militant, possibly radical segment of the American working-class:

They are a tremendous source of potential revolutionary strength and vigor. They have a double oppression as workers and Negroes to fill them with fighting spirit and resentment against capitalism. It has been one of the most serious errors of the left wing to underestimate and to neglect the development of this great proletarian fighting force.

Foster maintained a special influence with Communist Chicago packinghouse activists for whom “*the Black worker was this country’s Achilles heel*” [emphasis added]<sup>39</sup>

### ALL OR NOTHING AND FIGHT OVER FLIGHT

Yet more than discriminatory lay-offs, an increasingly long-term shared workplace experience (for lay-off survivors) with white workers, and Left-led union interracialism created black workers’ special militancy in the 1930s Chicago stockyards. The logic behind that militancy was both more “internal” to the distinctive experience and consciousness of black workers and more curiously continuous with their previous outward company loyalty. In a 1970 interview, former Armour’s PWOC shopsteward Sophie Koscilowski retrospectively speculated that the particularly subordinate, declining workplace position of blacks’ made them more “courageous . . . maybe because they felt they didn’t have much to lose.”<sup>40</sup>

African American workers’ distinctive, precarious position in the packinghouses encouraged militancy in a different way. Given traditional labeling of them as inferior workers useful mainly as inexpensive “strike

insurance,” black workers in the stockyards had previously felt especially pressured to adopt an outwardly deferential attitude toward their employers. Once they burned the increasingly frayed paternalist bridge through participation in the CIO, their stake in the success of the PWOC—sworn as it was to specially defend black job interests—was especially great. They less than white workers could afford to embrace the CIO cause in a lukewarm way. Their “all-or-nothing” position became a weapon for the PWOC, helping explain why some black packinghouse workers made particularly sudden, dramatic shifts from outward company loyalty to militant union allegiance.<sup>41</sup>

This “all-or-nothing” logic complemented a “fight over flight” logic to black militancy. Given widespread racial discrimination in 1930s layoffs, black packinghouse workers were especially restricted in their ability to escape worsening Depression-era packinghouse job conditions (accelerated work speed, rising foreman abuse, and reduced wages, for example). Given their inability to find other work, black packinghouse workers, even more than white workers in the 1930s, seeking to improve their working conditions had to do so through action in their current workplace.<sup>42</sup>

### **DOWN ON THE KILLING FLOOR: BLACK WORKPLACE RESOURCES**

The new black militancy reflected black workers’ sense of power and pride as well as their feelings of betrayal, desperation, and entrapment. Relatively unburdened by the sometimes disabling memory of previous crushing union defeats that haunted many older white workers,<sup>43</sup> blacks in the stockyards brought some distinct advantages to the CIO cause. Their persistent, even deepening position “down on the killing floors”—in the industry’s historical strongholds of technically irreplaceable knife skill, working-class shop-floor “manliness,” and workplace bargaining power—had given rise to a number of “natural” black shop-floor “leaders” even before the rise of the biracial PWOC. It was on the “kill and cut,” where legendarily rugged packinghouse workers were least “timid” and where workers could most effectively protest the employers’ driving work regime (by damaging materials and “bottlenecking” the labor process), that packinghouse unionism’s leading organic shop-floor resisters had always emerged.

Early black PWOC worker-activists and local union presidents Jefferson Beckley (from Armour’s), Phillip Weightman (Swift’s), Ken

Collins (Wilson's), Samuel Clemens, Pete Brown, and Jesse Vaughn (the last three headed PWOC locals in a handful of independent, medium-sized porkpacking plants known as the "little six") hardly received their first introduction to the "long tradition of [work] stoppages" on the killing floors from Communist and other PWOC activists. They learned about and internalized the game of rank-and-file shop-floor resistance on the "kill and cut" before the rise of the CIO. They built on this experience to develop the tactic of undertaking "quickie" job actions, leaving valuable, highly perishable materials to waste and stopping the "endless chain" of packinghouse work until grievances found resolution. They helped make Chicago's killing floors in the late 1930s into turbulent hotbeds of direct workplace action on behalf of union recognition, racial justice, and a new measure of rank-and-file work control, creating what Armour managers considered a "chaotic" shop-floor environment.<sup>44</sup>

Some black PWOC pioneers brought to the CIO cause prior organizational skills related to their shop-floor status and skill. Brown and Vaughn had headed locals of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen (the PWOC's AFL rival) prior to the PWOC's formation, suggesting pre-CIO origins to the special black militancy and biracialism of the industrial workers' movement in the 1930s stockyards.<sup>45</sup> Phillip Weightman had been a rank-and-file leader in Swift & Company's anti-union system of welfare-capitalism. A highly skilled hog-butcher with a history of engaging in informal killing-floor job actions and getting grievances settled through personal discussion with supervisors, Weightman managed the welfarist Swift company's all-black "Swift Premiums" baseball team in the mid-1930s and possessed considerable influence with managers. After his days as a self-described "Swift-oriented company man" ended in 1938, when he failed to secure the re-hiring of a white co-worker who he felt had been wrongly fired and read the National Labor Relations (Wagner) Act (concluding that the new legislation gave industrial unionism substantive legal backing in the stockyards), Weightman's formidable shop-floor presence became a key weapon for the fledgling CIO local at the Chicago Swift's plant.<sup>46</sup>

### **"THE NEGRO IS MOST ARTICULATE": BLACK CULTURAL RESOURCES**

The facts that the special black militancy noted by contemporary observers of the late 1930s stockyards was not limited to male workers

and that blacks played leading roles in city unionization drives outside the stockyards suggests that part of the explanation for special black militancy in the stockyards lay in black experience and culture beyond shop-floor and union. Women held few if any strategic knife positions on the killing floors and none of the highly skilled knife jobs. They maintained little presence in pre-CIO unions and employee representation plans. And there was no other industry in interwar Chicago where blacks attained strategic workplace positions remotely parallel to that reached by black workers in meatpacking.<sup>47</sup>

Black culture directly complemented workplace and labor-market militancy in Chicago's stockyards. A PWOC leader reported that blacks' facility with the English language gave them an edge over workers of Eastern European ancestry in playing leadership roles within the union. "The Negro," the PWOC activist told Cayton, "is best informed on union procedure and is most articulate. The foreign groups understand but aren't articulate because of language difficulties."<sup>48</sup> African Americans' rich and highly expressive culture of song, aggressive public speaking, and preaching<sup>49</sup> merged well with a CIO "movement culture," which challenged workers to transcend their private fears by engaging in dramatic public actions and demonstrations.<sup>50</sup>

### *Education as the Path*

The black community's distinctive emphasis on education as a path to personal and "race" advancement<sup>51</sup> also played a significant role in blacks' union leadership. Black Belt residents exhibited higher rates of elementary and high school attendance and graduation than inhabitants of the predominantly Polish and Lithuanian Back-of-the-Yards.<sup>52</sup> According to leading Chicago industrial employers in 1926, educational attainments enabled black workers to play a leading role in company-sponsored employee representation plans during the 1920s.<sup>53</sup> Black workers articulated PWOC demands to supervisors and management and performed key PWOC tasks such as handling grievances with management, writing union shop-papers, and speaking to fellow workers about the benefits of organization.

Leading PWOC activist Herbert March remembered that black Armour workers who possessed college and professional degrees became some of the local's most effective, articulate union leaders. March's recollection suggests a curious way in which black educational attainments interacted with the racial inequities of Chicago's professional and cleri-

cal job market to deepen the logic of blacks' ascendance to positions of leadership within the union. A disproportionate number of highly educated black Chicagoans could not find employment matching their qualifications. Blacks with college and even graduate degrees worked as Pullman porters, rail-station "red caps," hotel bellhops, and stockyard laborers. These remarkable, not-so "rank-and-file" black workers had special talents for which they found no outlet in the operations of a discriminatory economic system. For some of these highly educated black workers, the distinctly anti-racist PWOC provided a logical outlet.<sup>54</sup>

They did so proudly, with little of the debilitating shame that is commonly associated with employment below one's qualifications. As a black Chicago physician told Cayton and Drake, "social position doesn't depend on the kind of work you do. There are a lot of my fraternity brothers who 'went on the road' [worked as Pullman Porters or dining-car waiters] after they got out of school. And there are plenty of [black] fellows with university degrees working in the big hotels." This remark highlighted what Cayton and Drake found to be "a peculiarity of the Negro social-status scale in America: a heavier weighting of education than of occupation. With a very narrow occupational spread, education is used to mark off social divisions within the same general occupational level."<sup>55</sup> This reflected the black community's broad understanding that the northern job market was unfairly stacked against even highly educated blacks and that community's focus on education as a source of status in and of itself.

### *Working-class Preachers*

Differences in black and white working-class religious practice on Chicago's South Side also contributed to black leadership in the CIO packinghouse union. It would hardly be accurate to describe the dominant religious institution in white packinghouse workers' lives, the Catholic church, as opposed to the union cause in the twentieth-century Chicago stockyards. Historians of Chicago's heavily researched white-ethnic Back-of-the-Yards neighborhood have shown how Catholic pastors supported Saul Alinsky's famous Back-of-the-Yards Neighborhood Council (formed in 1939), which in turn offered vital support to the CIO. Ethnic pastors supported the SYLC during World War I and walked picket lines during the national meatpacking strike of 1946. At a pivotal moment in PWOC's struggle for a contract with Armour's in 1939, the PWOC received crucial support from liberal Chicago Bishop Bernard Sheil.<sup>56</sup>

It is significant, however, that, as Harold Preece found, twenty of the Chicago Armour CIO local's fifty black shop-stewards in the fall of 1939 were "storefront preachers."<sup>57</sup> While an often-conservative, full-time clergy (initially very suspicious of the PWOC's Communist connections<sup>58</sup>) exercised relatively authoritarian rule over a handful of large, ornate, and highly formal Catholic parishes in the white-ethnic Back-of-the-Yards, the most ubiquitous religious institution in the Black Belt was the often bare bones storefront church. St. Clair Drake identified 338 such churches in Chicago's Depression-era black community. According to Drake and Cayton:

Of Bronzeville's nearly 500 religious congregations, only one in five worships in a regular church edifice. The remainder praise the Lord in vacant stores and in houses, abandoned theaters, remodeled garages, and halls. These small churches tend to be concentrated on rundown, low-rent business streets and in generally undesirable residential areas. One street alone has 90 to a three-mile stretch, or 1.9 per block. There members tend to be drawn from areas relatively close to the church. On the whole they show visible evidence of low social status—illiterate scrawls for bulletin boards, tasteless ornamentation, untrained ministers, a low-income membership, "shouting" worshipers. The members have often drifted away from larger churches.

Usually run by a weekday wage-earner who "felt the call to ministry," the commonly Pentecostal or Baptist storefronts served as "decidedly lower class churches" that permitted "the widest range of personal expression." Unlike their white counterparts in the larger Catholic parishes, storefront preachers lacked formal theological training and preached the CIO cause on the basis partly of their ongoing experiences on filthy and dangerous packinghouse shop-floors. Their qualifications lay in their abilities to entertain and awe congregations with dramatic bible-laden oratory, to maintain threadbare storefront finances, and to recruit new parishioners. The large number of would-be preachers competing for followers among a mostly impoverished and skeptical black population during the 1930s put special premiums on these abilities.

Cayton and Drake encountered a successful South Side preacher who used savings from his wages in the packinghouses to purchase a small apartment building. This storefront minister rented out the upstairs, turned the downstairs into a church, erected a loudspeaker, and received assistance from his wife in canvassing surrounding blocks for members. If he was like most of the more popular storefront preachers, he treated pa-



rishioners to a showy display of Fundamentalist theology painting stark portraits of a strict and judgmental God “who gave his only begotten son to save a sin-sick world.” Storefront sermons included “diatribes against card-playing and dancing, attendance at movies and baseball games on Sunday and ‘putting the world before Christ.’” They preached “justification by faith, declaring that a man is not saved because he is good, but will act good because he’s saved.” They were commonly punctuated and interrupted by parishioners, who encouraged their minister to “preach it” and “tell it like it is.”

Those interruptions fit the storefront’s distinctly egalitarian code. “The poorest man in the church,” one storefront member told Cayton and Drake, “is just as big as the richest.” Proclaiming the equality of all men in their common judgement by a stem and leveling Lord, storefront theology hardly justified the deep inequalities of class and race in 1930s Chicago. At the same time, storefront members expressed their desires for associating with people of like (lower-class) status and for being heard and known within their congregation regardless of their wealth and status. As one storefront parishioner told Cayton and Drake, “you have to go to one of the large churches early on Sunday to get a seat, you have to be dressed in a style or you feel out of place, and there is not as much friendship in large church as in one of these store-fronts. In a big church the preacher don’t know you unless you make big donations or you are an officer of some kind. With my church it is different. We are more like churches in the South—everybody is recognized.”<sup>59</sup>

Including at least one PWOC local union president (“Reverend Lee” of the “Levi Casings” plant<sup>60</sup>), black packinghouse worker-preachers brought spiritual zeal, egalitarian sentiments, and useful organizational, rhetorical, and leadership skills to the CIO cause. Like the CIO packinghouse union, the small churches run by storefront preachers were voluntary associations that depended on contributions from lower-class parishioners, democratic participation, and rank-and-file leadership. Also like the PWOC, they depended on the charisma of “natural leaders” within the working-class black community and on personal contact between those leaders and the more ordinary rank-and-file.<sup>61</sup>

## “MIDDLE CLASS” ASSOCIATIONS

The storefront church was not the only institution of black Chicago community life that provided skills, contacts, and ideas that likely informed black CIO militancy in the stockyards. Among other organizations that made up black Chicago's “intricate and complex web of voluntary associations” during the 1930s were the community's large number of more outwardly “middle-class” churches, fraternal lodges, and recreational (athletic, musical, dance, card-playing, and theatrical) clubs. Along with the community's leading civic institutions—the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Chicago Urban League—these organizations provided numerous opportunities for the development of the sort of leadership that unions required. While such organizations generally emphasized middle-class “respectability,” distinguishing themselves from the world of the black lower class, they were open to packinghouse laborers who exhibited what their leaders called “correct behavior” and a “proper respect for getting ahead.”<sup>62</sup>

Also significant in influencing and sustaining black labor militancy was the *Chicago Defender*. Purchased by at least 40,000 black belt residents each week and widely discussed throughout black Chicago, the middle-class *Defender* was militantly dedicated to editor Robert Abbot's ideal of “complete equality of Negroes with white people.” Even with the onset of World War II, it refused to tone down its harsh criticism of American racism within and beyond Chicago, resisting government officials' pleas for unqualified support of the military effort. Once it came over to the side of industrial unionism, the stridently and relentlessly race-conscious *Defender* was a potent black cultural weapon in the CIO arsenal.<sup>63</sup>

## RACE CONSCIOUSNESS AS A CIO RESOURCE

The one common theme and aspiration uniting the diverse organizations that comprised black Chicago's associational life in the 1930s was race consciousness—a fundamental and underlying concern with “advancing the race” and solidarity between blacks of different position and status. That consciousness, reflected in black workers' persistent tendency to refract the lessons of their industrial experience through the prism of race, had mainly worked against packinghouse unionism during previous organizing drives. It revealed a new capacity to support and energize labor militancy in the stockyards of the CIO era.<sup>64</sup>

On the basis of interviews with hundreds of black Chicagoans during the 1930s, Cayton and Drake found that blacks' inferior status and minority position convinced African Americans of the futility of individualism and the necessity for group solidarity.<sup>65</sup>

Although Negroes of all class levels stress individual initiative as a factor in "racial advancement," they are keenly aware that as a separate subordinate group in American life, the dice are loaded against the individual. Everybody knows that "no matter how high a Negro gets, he's still just a Negro." Race consciousness breeds a demand for racial solidarity . . . they see their ultimate hope in presenting some sort of united front against the world.

In Chicago as in the Jim Crow South, the African American community "placed," in Robin D.G. Kelley's words, "more emphasis on communal values and collective uplift than the prevailing . . . individualist ideology of the white ruling-classes."<sup>66</sup> Such thinking closely corresponded with the inherently anti-individualist cultural requirements of labor movements. Unions depend on the notion that the odds of marketplace capitalism are stacked against (working-class) individuals and that working people must present a "united front" against employers and those who support the bosses.<sup>67</sup> Once divorced from the discredited strategy of company loyalty and linked to the union cause, this race consciousness isolated those in the black community who still wished to criticize participation in the labor movement and complemented the all-or-nothing logic of black trade unionism.

Black race consciousness simultaneously informed black labor militancy in a more individualistic fashion. In Cayton and Drake's findings, black Chicagoans disproportionately denied access to the city's better jobs and homes expressed "race pride" in compensatory ways, including leadership in civic organizations and other activities. "Race heroes" such as boxer Joe Louis and track-and-field star Jesse Owens "beat whites at their own game" and were "fearless in their approach to white people." This rugged, race-conscious mentality found expression through black workers' many dramatic confrontations with white foremen and managers on the chronically turbulent killing floors. Race consciousness also encouraged black workers to take a primary role on the shop floor and in the labor movement. As Oscar Hutton found in 1939, Hank Johnson's success in recruiting black packinghouse workers reflected his position "as a symbol of the New Negro in the trade union movement."<sup>68</sup>

Black workers' historical race consciousness further helped make them

the best PWOC members by giving a double meaning to their activism. Hank Johnson spoke for many black PWOC members when he told the Chicago Defender in 1939 that:<sup>69</sup>

The present conflict at Armour & Company is more than a battle between a corporation and a union. It is also another chapter in the long epic of the Negro people. *The PWOC has not only protected workers in their rights as workers but in their rights as citizens* [emphasis added]. Since the coming of the PWOC, Negroes entitled to promotion have a better chance of getting it because the union feels that every man has the right to advance according to his ability, whatever of his color.

In the stockyards as elsewhere, the unionization campaign of the 1930s represented a movement for democratic self-expression and civic inclusion for all industrial workers.<sup>70</sup> But black packinghouse workers especially perceived the PWOC as something more than a practical, economic struggle for “bread and butter.” They saw the CIO as part of an older, democratic freedom struggle for equal rights. The point emerges strikingly from the comments of Jim Cole, an African American beef butcher who started working in the stockyards in 1919, the year of a bloody race riot on Chicago’s South Side. Twenty years later, Cole told Betty Burke:<sup>71</sup>

I don’t care if the union don’t do another lick of work raising our wages *or settling our grievances about anything* [emphasis added]. I’ll always believe they done the greatest thing in the world getting everybody who works in the Yards together, and breaking up the hate and bad feelings that used to be held against the Negro.

Nineteenth-century European workers’ struggle to wrest democratic, human rights from feudal and absolutist structures empowered them in their battles with employers.<sup>72</sup> Similarly, many black workers in the stockyards viewed the PWOC cause as part of a related quest for race equality. Generations of class- and race-based exploitation—what Communist theoreticians and onetime stockyards activist William Z. Foster termed “double oppression”—combined with the packers’ discriminatory workplace practices to ensure that black labor militancy in the stockyards expressed material self-interests as well as the more outwardly idealistic quest for racial justice.<sup>73</sup>

Black workers’ race-conscious activity directly influenced the direction of PWOC activism. The union’s racial policies reflected the role

played by black activists as well as the interracial strategies and beliefs of leading white militants. Since black militants entered the union early—"on the ground floor," as Oscar Hutton put it—the PWOC's black civil rights dimension reflected as well as attracted black worker-activists who made no distinctions between traditional union objectives and the more seemingly idealistic goal of racial justice.<sup>74</sup>

In a suggestive historiographical essay published twenty years ago, leading American labor historian David Montgomery referred to the "simultaneous emergence of union, political, and race consciousness among Chicago's black packinghouse workers" during the late 1930s.<sup>75</sup> The process described here is better described as the potent merging of those workers' historical race consciousness with an unprecedentedly strong union or class consciousness on their part. That consciousness expressed itself through a new black worker militancy that was largely continuous with previous mostly non-union, black labor strategies for attaining security and freedom in the northern industrial metropolis. Like the racist, divide-and-rule personnel tactics that the packers' had used with anti-union success over previous decades, black workers' racially centered world view now revealed itself as a double-edged knife, capable of energizing class struggle and consciousness in the stockyards.

The packers' racial divide-and-rule personnel practices backfired—one might even say boomeranged—in the late 1930s. The predominantly black killing floors, whose racial composition reflected managers' historical calculation that "colored" workers provided the best insurance policy against labor disruption in the Yards' most pivotal work departments, became centers of direct workplace action in the name of industrial unionism. Incredulous Chicago packinghouse managers predictably blamed radical "outside agitators" for the new interracial and black labor militancy in their workplace establishments.<sup>76</sup> They were not entirely mistaken. Some leading activists in the Chicago PWOC, including leading militants Herbert March and Hank Johnson, were in fact Communists with origins outside the local industry. And, by all accounts (even that of the subsequently anti-Communist Phillip Weightman), Communists spearheaded the remarkable racial cooperation that made the PWOC attractive to black packinghouse workers and helped break through potent working-class racial divisions in meat-packing.<sup>77</sup>

But equally significant in explaining the new black militancy were the deep racial inequities of the employers' workplace regime (laid bare

by racially discriminatory firings in the 1930s), black workers' long-term presence in strategic and often skilled jobs, the relative racial mixing of packinghouse work over the interwar years, and black workers' distinctive cultural and community resources and consciousness. In linking their aspirations to the union cause on an unprecedented scale, Chicago's black packinghouse workers showed like never before that class- and race-consciousness were neither inevitably nor absolutely opposed to one another. They also revealed that their own racially distinct experience, culture, community, and consciousness provided special resources for, and contributions to, labor resistance. When they rejected traditional trade-union stereotypes of black workers as helpless, paternalized tools of the employer and inherently "poor trade unionists," CIO activists in Chicago's stockyards tapped and helped articulate but did not create this deeper, internal logic of black labor militancy. It is likely that a similar logic was at work in other settings where we are learning that black workers took a significant, even leading role in the industrial unionization efforts of the 1930s and 1940s.

## NOTES

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2. Paul Street, "Breaking Up Old Hatreds and Breaking Through the Fear: the Emergence of the Packinghouse Workers' Organizing Committee in Chicago, 1933–1940," *Studies in History and Politics*, 5 (1986): 68–85; Robert Zieger, *The CIO: 1935–1955* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1995), pp. 22–93.

3. Harold Preece, "What Goes on in Packingtown?," *Chicago Defender*, 23 September 1939, p. 15.

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11. Hutton, "The Negro Worker," p. 112.

12. This and the following paragraph rely on Street, "Breaking Up Old Hatreds," pp. 65–74; Rick Halpern, *Down on the Killing Floor: Black and White Workers in Chicago's Packinghouses, 1904–1954* (Urbana, Ill., 1997), pp. 96–200; Roger Horowitz, "Negro and White Unite and Fight: A Social History of Industrial Unionism in Meatpacking, 1930–1990" (Urbana, Ill., 1997), pp. 1–124; Rick Halpern and Roger Horowitz, *Meatpackers: an Oral History of Black Packinghouse Workers and Their Struggle for Racial and Economic Equality* (New York, 1996); Rick Halpern, "Race and Radicalism in the Chicago Stockyards," in *Unionizing the Jungles: Labor and Community in the Twentieth-Century Meatpacking Industry*, ed. Shelton Stromquist and Marv Bergman (Iowa City, 1997), pp. 75–95; Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, pp. 312–341; Robert Zieger, *American Workers, American Unions, 1920–1985* (Baltimore, 1986), pp. 51–53; Zieger, *The CIO*, pp. 83–85; Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, pp. 45–46, 164–65, 204, 206, 333–337; Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights*, 117–144, 155; Phil Foner, *Organized Labor and the Black Worker, 1619–1973* (New York, 1976), pp. 215–237; David Brody, *Workers in Industrial America: Essays on the Twentieth-Century Struggle* (New York, 1980), p. 98; Michael Goldfield, "Race and the CIO: the Possibilities for Racial Egalitarianism During the 1930s and 1940s," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 44 (Fall 1993): 1–32; Michael Goldfield, *The Color of Politics: Race and the Mainsprings of American Politics* (New York, 1997); Halpern, "Organized Labor, Black Workers," pp. 45, 61–73; Horowitz, "The Path Not Taken," pp. 4, 36–38, 74–78, 84–85, 208–213, 219–224, 229–232, 236–238, 243–249, 257, 282–284, 296–338, 391–392, 394; Street, "Working in the Yards," 296–302, 556–57, 594, 606–07, 655–666."

13. Cohen supplements such analysis with a cultural explanation of worker militancy, including that of black workers, in the 1930s. See Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, pp. 138–143, 157–58, 208–21, 323–333. But Cohen's emphasis on working-class cultural homogenization resulting from the Americanizing influence of mass culture and welfare capitalism in the interwar years does not seem particularly well-suited to the racial dimensions of working-class social history in and around Chicago's stockyards. At the same time that ethnic differences between different white-ethnic groups faded significantly on Chicago's South Side, racial apartheid continued to define black working-class social and cultural experience and may have actually worsened through the interwar period. See Cayton and Drake, *Black Metropolis*, pp. 99–263, 379–387; Roger Horowitz, "Negro and White," p. 65.

14. Street, "Logic and Limits," pp. 672–675; Halpern, *Down on the Killing Floors*, chaps. four and five; Halpern, "Race and Radicalism"; Street, "Working in the Yards," chaps. 5, 9, 10; Horowitz, "Negro and White," chaps. 1–5. The first treatment or discovery of this conjuncture is curiously unacknowledged in recent published historical work on the 1930s stockyards (except in Street, "Logic and Limits," n. 60). It is Street, "Breaking Up Old Hatreds" (cited above) based on Paul Street, "The Rise of the Chicago Packinghouse Workers' Organizing Committee, 1933–1940," paper delivered at the Chicago Area Labor History Group, Newberry Library, Chicago, Ill., May 21, 1983.

15. Robin D.G. Kelley, "'We Are Not What We Seem': Rethinking Working-Class Black Opposition in the Jim Crow South," *Journal of American History* (June 1993): 75–112; Robin D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York, 1994); Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*; Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, "Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of American History* (December 1988): 786–111;

Honey, *Southern Labor*; Korstad, "Daybreak of Freedom"; Halpern, "Organized Labor, Black Workers."

16. Lorenzo Green and Carter Woodson, *The Negro Wage Earner* (Washington D.C., 1930), pp. 272–74; George Haynes, *The Negro at Work During the World War and During Reconstruction* (Washington D.C., 1921), pp. 54–55; Herbst, *The Negro*, pp. xvii–66; Barrett, *Work and Community*, p. 48; Paul Taylor, *Mexican Labor in the U.S.: the Calumet Region* (Berkeley, Calif., 1930), pp. 40, 66–123; U.S., Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of Population*, 4 (Washington D.C., 1932), pp. 447–450; Estelle Hill Scott, *Occupational Changes Among Negroes in Chicago* (Chicago, 1939), pp. 217–18; "Palmer's New City," no. 7, 1923, pp. 4–6 in Mary McDowell Papers, Chicago Historical Society, Box 3, folder 15, p. 6; William Z. Foster, "The Organization of Negro Workers," *Daily Worker*, 16 May 1929.

17. Kate Adams, *Humanizing a Great Industry* (Chicago, 1919), p. 21; Herbst, *The Negro*, pp. xviii–xxii, 70, 76–80, 85, 89, 112, 171; Street, "Working in the Yards," chaps. 5, 6.

18. U.S., Census, *Occupations* [see note 17] (1930), pp. 447–450; Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, p. 112; Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, pp. 36, 207, 354; Walter Fogel, *The Negro in the Meat Industry* (Philadelphia, 1970), pp. 29, 45–6; Scott, *Occupational Changes*, pp. 221–22; *Chicago Daily Defender*, 20 August 1927, p. 10: "Race Pays Tribute to Great Magnates."

19. Herbst, *The Negro*, xviii–xxiii, 70, 76–80, 85, 89, 112, 171 (Herbst quotation from p. xiii); Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, pp. 214–252; Mary Elizabeth Pidgeon, *The Employment and Growth of Women in Slaughtering and Meatpacking* (Washington D.C., 1932), pp. 20, 31, 51, 53; Estelle Hill Scott, *Occupational Changes Among Negroes in Chicago* (Chicago, 1939), pp. 233–34, 242; Horowitz, "The Path Not Taken," pp. 208–211, 223–224; "Working in the Yards," pp. 112–115, 299–301; Kampfert, "A History," vol. 3, p. 22; Street, "Logic and Limits," p. 64. Radical economist Giovanni Arrighi's concept of "workplace bargaining power" refers to the strategic capacity of some industrial workers to disrupt and damage the flow of work and materials in expensive, subdivided, continuous-flow, and inflexible industrial workplace facilities. Arrighi, "A Crisis of Hegemony," in *Dynamics of Global Crisis*, ed. Samir Amin et al. (New York, 1982), pp. 82–91. The especially perishable and expensive nature of the packers' raw material added significantly to packinghouse workers' direct workplace bargaining power.

20. Alma Herbst, "The Negro in the Slaughtering and Meatpacking Industry in Chicago" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1928), pp. 127–129, 131–132; "Memorandum of June 17 Address Before the Interracial Committee of the Union League Club," 1926, Julius Rosenwald Papers, University of Chicago, Box 40, folder 2, pp. 2–3; *Armour Magazine* (April 1927): 5–6; Street, "Logic and Limits," pp. 660–662.

21. Among many possible cites, see Chicago Commission on Race Relations, *The Negro in Chicago* (Chicago, 1922), pp. 429; Herbst, *The Negro*, pp. 63–65, 127–147; Grossman, *Land of Hope*, p. 242; Street, "Working in the Yards," pp. 316–343.

22. Street, "Logic and Limits"; William Tuttle, *Race Riot*, pp. 108–156; Grossman, *Land of Hope*, chap. 7; Barrett, *Work and Community*, pp. 202–224; Rick Halpern, "Race, Ethnicity, and Union in the Chicago Stockyards, 1917–1922," *International Review of Social History*, 37 (1992): 25–58; Street, "Working in the Yards," pp. 316–341, 535–540.

23. Barrett, *Work and Community*, pp. 205, 208–209, 212–213, 215. See also Grossman, *Land of Hope*, pp. 232–234, 236–239; Halpern, "Race, Ethnicity, and Union," pp. 42–43.

24. Street, "Logic and Limits," pp. 669–672; Paul Street, "Packinghouse Blues," *Chicago History*, 18 (Fall 1989): 68–85.
25. *Defender*, 7 July 1923, p. 3; Herbst, "The Negro," pp. 127–129, 131–132; Street, "Working in the Yards," pp. 312–13, 296–300.
26. Thomas in Banks, *First Person*, p. 69; Herbst, *The Negro*, pp. xxii–xxiii; Fogel, *Negro in the Meat Industry*, pp. 49–51.
27. March Recollections, pp. 55–56; Anna Novack interview in Banks, *First Person*, p. 64; Cayton and Mitchell, *Black Workers*, pp. 270–71; *CIO News: Packinghouse Workers' Edition*, 2 January 1939, p. 2; Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, pp. 83–89; Kampfert, "A History," 4, part 2, 3; Cayton and Mitchell, *Black Workers*, pp. 270–71; Harold Gosnell, *Negro Politicians and the Rise of Negro Politics in Chicago* (Chicago, 1935), pp. 325–341.
28. Preece, "What Goes On," *CIO News: Packinghouse Workers' Edition*, 2 January 1939; March Recollections, pp. 55–56; *Swift CIO Flash*, 26 June 1939; Banks, *First Person*, pp. 64, 67–71; Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, pp. 312–341; interview with Phillip Weightman by Roger Horowitz and Rick Halpern, October 7–8, 1986, Washington D.C., United Packinghouse Workers of America Oral History Project, State Historical Society of Wisconsin [hereafter "UPWAOHP"], tape 285, side 2; interview with Herbert March by Horowitz and Halpern, October 21, 1986, Madison, Wisconsin, UPWAOHP tape 298, side 1; Stella Nowicki, "Back of the Yards," in *Rank and File: Personal Histories of Working-Class Organizers*, ed. Staughton and Alice Lynd (Princeton, N.J., 1981), pp. 83, 88; Hutton, "The Negro Worker," pp. 104–106; Theodore Purcell, *The Worker Speaks His Mind on Company and Union* (Cambridge, Mass., 1954), pp. 57, 319, n.4; Horowitz, "The Path Not Taken," pp. 245–46, 257. The Swift's superintendent is quoted in Lewis, "Trade Union Policies," p. 68.
29. *Midwest Daily Record*, 11 June 1938; *CIO News: Packinghouse Workers Edition*, 5, 12 December 1938; Hutton, "The Negro Worker," pp. 109–112; Preece, "What Goes"; Weightman interview, UPWAOHP tape 286, side 2; Stephen Brier, "Labor, Race, and Politics: A Black Worker's Life," *Labor History*, 23 (1983): 416–421; Barbara Newell, *Chicago and the Labor Movement* (Urbana, Ill., 1961), pp. 241–42; Horowitz, "The Path Not Taken," pp. 242–243.
30. *Midwest Daily Record*, 25 November 1938. On Irish as blacks' foremost South Side enemies, see Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, p. 62; Barrett, *Work and Community*, pp. 219–224.
31. Thomas, in Banks, *First Person*, pp. 68–69.
32. Preece, "What Goes"; Hutton, "The Negro Worker," p. 107. For evidence that this praise of interracialism in Back of the Yards is somewhat exaggerated, see Halpern "Black and White," p. 384.
33. Hutton, "The Negro Worker," p. 104. For recollections consistent with Hutton's observation, see Weightman interview, UPWAOHP tape 287, side 2; March interview, UPWAOHP tape 294, side 2; Kampfert, "A History," vol. 3, p. 23.
34. Herbst, *The Negro*, pp. xxii, 70, 78–80, 168–169; Street, "Working in the Yards," pp. 309, 661. Former Swift militant Phillip Weightman uses the term "fraternity" to describe Black-Polish shop-floor relations in the 1930s in Weightman interview, UPWAOHP tape 285, side 2.
35. March interview, UPWAOHP tapes 294, side 2, 298, side 1; Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, pp. 259–61; Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, pp. 88–89, 353–355.
36. Halpern, "Black and White," pp. 285–288; Halpern, *Down on the Killing Floor*, pp. 107–112.
37. March interview, UPWAOHP tape 294, side 2; March ILHS tape; March

Recollections, pp. 1–40; author's interview with Stella Nowicki, 1983; *Special House Committee on Un-American Activities, Executive Hearings, November 17, 1939, Chicago, Illinois* (Washington D.C., 1940), pp. 342–390.

38. Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, p. 313; Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, p. 337; March interview, UPWAOHP tape 294, side 1, 298, side 2; William Z. Foster, "Your Questions Answered" (June, 1939), reproduced in Foster, *American Trade Unionism* (New York, 1947), p. 286.

39. William Z. Foster, "The Organization of Negro Workers," *Daily Worker*, 16 May 1929, reproduced in Foster, *American Trade Unionism*, p. 183; Street, "Logic and Limits," pp. 663–666; March interview, UPWAOHP tape 295, side 1; Nowicki, "Back of the Yards," pp. 74–76; author's interview with Stella Nowicki, 1983; Gosnell, *Negro Politicians*, pp. 323, 332; Sterling Spero and Abram Harris, *The Black Worker: the Negro and the Labor Movement* (Port Washington, N.Y., 1966), pp. 414–429; Weightman interview, UPWAOHP tape 286, side 2. The concluding quotation is from Weightman, a black worker at Swift's who was unsuccessfully recruited by the stockyards section of the CP during the late 1930s.

40. Kosciolowski interview, ROLHC, 33; Cohen, *Making a Deal*, p. 335.

41. See the suggestive analysis in Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, p. 317. For examples of such sudden, dramatic shifts, Kampfert, "A History," vol. 3, pt. 2, 5–6; Hutton, "The Negro Worker," p. 102; Weightman interview, UPWAOHP tapes 284–285.

42. Phil Foner, *Black Workers and Organized Labor*, pp. 188–89; Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, pp. 83–84; March Recollections, pp. 51–53; Kampfert, "A History," volume 3; Street, "Working in the Yards," pp. 586–595, 598; Kosciolowski interview, ROLHC, 6,15; Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, pp. 242, 335.

43. *Midwest Daily Record*, 10 June 1939; Weightman interview, UPWAOHP tape 287, side 2; Hutton, "The Negro Worker," p. 104; Kampfert, "A History," vol. 3, p. 23.

44. March ILHS tape; oral history interviews with Weightman, Jesse Vaughn, and March, UPWAOHP tapes 32–33, 295, 299–300, 284–88, 295; March Recollections, pp. 62, 96–97; author's interview with Stella Nowicki; *Midwest Daily Record*, 15 February 1938, 2 March 1938, 9 March 1938, 11 June 1938, 14 July 1938, 16 July 1938, 14 October 1938, 27 October 1938, 30 October 1938, 1 November 1938, 26 November 1938, 29 November 1938, 23 June 1939, 28 August 1939; *CIO News: Packinghouse Edition*, 14 November 1938, 9 January 1939, 23 June 1939; Street, "Working in the Yards," pp. 113–114, 537–540, 646–653, 664; Street, "Breaking Up Old Hatreds," pp. 73–76; Newell, *Chicago and the Labor Movement*, p. 167.

45. March ILHS tape; Nowicki, "Back of the Yards," p. 80; interview with Jesse Vaughn by Horowitz and Halpern, Chicago, Illinois, 1985, UPWAOHP tape 32. Brown and Vaughn quickly led their Amalgamated locals into the PWOC after the formation of the CIO packinghouse union.

46. Weightman interview, UPWAOHP tapes 284–87; Weightman, "A History," 4, part 2, 5–6; Paul Street, "The Swift Difference: Workers, Managers, Militants and Welfare Capitalism in Chicago's Meatpacking Industry, 1921–1942," in Stromquist and Bergman, *Unionizing the "Jungles"*, pp. 36–38.

47. Interview with Anna Novack by Betty Burke, 1939, in Banks, *First Person*, p. 64; interview with Sophie Kosciolowski, ROLHC, p. 33; Hutton, "The Negro Worker," 92–103; Halpern and Horowitz, *Meatpackers*, p. 28; Scott, *Occupational Changes*, passim; Richard Rowan, *The Negro in the Steel Industry*, 25–37.

48. Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, p. 309.

49. Eugene Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll: the World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1976), pp. 157, 232–279, 324; Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights*,



pp. 116, 135–139; Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, pp. 148–149; Mathilda Burton, “Negro Work Songs,” 1939, The Negro in Illinois Survey, Illinois Writers’ Project, Works Progress Administration, Carter Woodson Branch of the Chicago Public Library.

50. Street, “Working in the Yards,” pp. 633–42, 646–51, 669–71; Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, pp. 339–349.

51. Timothy Smith, “Native Blacks and Foreign Whites: Varying Responses to Educational Opportunities in America, 1880–1950,” *Perspectives in American History*, 6 (1972): 309–319; Ernest Talbot, *Opportunities in School and Industry for the Children of the Stockyards District* (Chicago, 1916), pp. 8, 15–16, 23; John Bodnar, “Immigration, Kinship, and the Rise of Working-Class Realism in Industrial America,” *Journal of Social History*, 14 (1980): 45–65; Grossman, *Land of Hope*, pp. 8, 17–18, 36, 52, 54, 62, 81, 90–93, 161, 175–76, 182, 249–52, 257, 259, 263; Genovese, *Roll, Jordan Roll*, pp. 561–566; Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, pp. 515–516; Theodore Purcell, *The Worker Speaks His Mind on Company and Union* (Cambridge, Mass., 1954), p. 31. For suggestive comparative data on elementary and high school attendance and graduation rates among black workers and residents of the white-ethnic Back of the Yards neighborhood during the 1930s, see Halpern, *Down on the Killing Floor*, p. 278, n.45.

52. Halpern, *Down on the Killing Floors*, p. 278, n.45.

53. “Memorandum of June 17 Address Before the Interracial Committee of the Union League Club,” 1926, Julius Rosenwald Papers, University of Chicago, Box 40, folder 2, pp. 2–3.

54. March ILHS tape; Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, pp. 214–262, 515, 566 (see especially 239 and 515); Demsey Travis, *An Autobiography of Black Chicago* (Chicago, 1981), pp. 85, 95–96; Demsey Travis, *Autobiography of Black Politics* (Chicago, 1987), pp. 461, 481–82.

55. Cayton and Drake, *Black Metropolis*, pp. 515.

56. Dominic Pacyga, *Polish Immigrants and Industrial Chicago: Workers on the South Side* (Columbus, Ohio, 1991). Robert Slayton, *Back of the Yards: the Making of a Local Democracy* (Chicago, 1986).

57. Preece, “What Goes On.”

58. Many if not most senior Back-of-the-Yards Catholic pastors took a wary perspective on the CIO, denouncing the PWOC as “atheistic” and “Communist-dominated.” Long attached to fierce ethno-national rivalries for which Back-of-the-Yards was notorious, some of these priests felt uncomfortable with the inter-ethnic and biracial logic of the CIO. While they were countered by a more Americanized and liberal cadre of second-generation New Immigrant and pro-CIO/pro-New Deal assistant priests (who viewed their superiors as the “end of an era”), only a well publicized meeting between liberal Chicago Bishop Bernard Sheil and CIO President John L. Lewis in the fall of 1939 brought most of the Back-of-the-Yards’ influential Catholic churches to the CIO side in the stockyards. By that time, a considerable number of black packinghouse workers/preachers had already joined the CIO and likely begun spreading the CIO cause to their “flocks” (parishioners) and others. March Recollections, pp. 69–70; Street, “Working in the Yards,” pp. 666–668; Slayton, *Back of the Yards*, pp. 196–205.

59. Slayton, *Back of the Yards*, pp. 21–25, 79, 97–98, 118–126, 134–138; Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, pp. 381, 387–88, 611–653; Robert Sutherland, “An Analysis of Negro Churches in Chicago” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1930). pp. 4–5, 51–54, 71–72, 91–96; St. Clair Drake, *Churches and Voluntary Associations in the Chicago Negro Community* (Chicago, 1940), pp. 146–151, 298–306;



Alan Spear, *Black Chicago: the Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890–1920* (Chicago, 1967), p. 177; August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, *From Plantation to Ghetto* (New York, 1966), p. 265.

60. Jesse Vaughn interview, UPWAOHP tape 32.

61. Street, “Working in the Yards,” pp. 665–666. For suggestive ideas regarding the relationship between working-class religious and trade-union activism in a different time and place, see E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working-Class* (New York, 1963), pp. 43, 353, 380, 391, 394, 422, 509, 672–73.

62. Cayton and Drake, *Black Metropolis*, pp. 658–723.

63. Ibid, pp. 400–412.

64. Ibid, pp. 716–754.

65. Cayton and Drake, *Black Metropolis*, pp. 340–41, 566, 723. The quote is from p. 723.

66. Kelley, “We Are Not What We Seem,” p. 79.

67. Among numerous possible cites, see David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: the Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), pp. 2, 4; Selig Perlman, *A Theory of the Labor Movement* (New York, 1928), pp. 237–253.

68. Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, pp. 390–396; Hutton, “The Negro Worker,” p. 112.

69. Preece, “What Goes On.”

70. Among many possible cites, see Thomas Gobel, “Becoming American: Ethnic Workers and the Rise of the CIO,” *Labor History*, 29 (1988): 173–198;

71. Cole, 1939, in Banks, *First Person*, pp. 67–68.

72. Among many possible cites, see Thompson, *The Making of the English Working-Class*, passim; Wolfgang Abendroth, *A Short History of the European Working-Class* (New York, 1972), pp. 9–68.

73. Some recent scholarship has acknowledged the importance of this duality in explaining black participation in CIO unions. See Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights*, pp. 136–138; Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, p. 172; Halpern, “Organized Labor, Black Workers,” p. 71.

74. Hutton, “The Negro Worker,” p. 113; March ILHS tape; Preece, “What Goes On.”

75. Montgomery, “To Study the People: the American Working Class,” *Labor History*, 21 (Fall 1980): 510.

76. Kampfert, “A History,” volume 3, part 2, 5; *Armour: A Monthly Magazine* (October 1937): 18–19, (February 1938): 8, 20.

77. Horowitz and Halpern, *Meatpackers*, pp. 44–46.